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ABSTRACT

Three parameters of self-disclosure (intimacy, amount, and frequency) were examined during four 60-minute sessions of group interaction among 16 participants in a smoking-cessation seminar. Analyses focused upon the effects of successive sessions upon the measures of self-disclosure. Significant differences were found for intimacy and frequency of self-disclosure; no significant differences were found for amount of self-disclosure. (Author/AA)

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ASPECTS OF SELF-DISCLOSURE IN AN INSTRUCTIONAL SETTING

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Abstract

Three parameters of self-disclosure were examined during four, 60-minute sessions of group interaction in an instructional setting: intimacy, amount, and frequency. Significant differences between the sessions were found for intimacy and frequency of self-disclosure; no significant differences were found for amount of self-disclosure.

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ASPECTS OF SELF-DISCLOSURE IN AN INSTRUCTIONAL SETTING

The process of instruction, at least as it occurs in the traditional classroom setting, may be considered an interpersonal process (Barker, Stone, & Wahlers, 1975; Bassett & Smythe, 1975). One way of facilitating instruction, then, is to improve the basic interpersonal skills of the persons participating in the process (Barbour & Goldberg, 1974). One such important skill is self-disclosure (Bochner & Kelly, 1974; Barker, Stone, & Wahlers, 1975; Barbour & Goldberg, 1974; Johnson, 1972; Keltner, 1973). Self-disclosure has been defined in various ways. For the purpose of this study the transactional view of self-disclosure offered by Pearce & Sharp (1974) is used: "Self-disclosure occurs when one person voluntarily tells another person things about himself which the other is unlikely to know or to discover from other sources [p. 414]." Appropriate self-disclosure is helpful in creating a trusting, positive atmosphere for learning (Bochner & Kelly, 1974). When students make themselves known to other students, they are able to interact and help one another. When students make their thoughts known to the instructor, the instructor is in a better position to assess the students' abilities to understand concepts, fulfill assignments, and progress to more difficult tasks. Given the apparent value of self-disclosure in an instructional setting, therefore, investigation of this behavior seems important.

Although the self-disclosure literature is extensive, application of the research findings to an instructional setting is hampered by several methodological limitations. First, self-disclosure has traditionally been measured by self-report questionnaires which have consistently shown low correlation with actual disclosure (Himelstein & Lubin, 1965; Hurley & Hurley, 1969; Burhenne & Mirels, 1970; Himelstein & Kimbrough, 1963; Lubin & Harrison, 1964; Vondracek, 1969a, 1969b; Ehrlich & Graeven, 1971), or about which little information concerning predictive validity is known (West & Zingle, 1969; Rickers-Ovsiankina, 1956; Rickers-Ovsiankina & Kusmin, 1958; Levinger & Senn, 1967; Plog, 1967; Marshall, 1970). Both Argyris (1968) and Vondracek (1969b) have criticized the use of self-report measures, contending that people are poor judges of their own communication skills, and cannot describe their disclosure behavior as it occurs. Although several investigators have emphasized the need for a behavioral instrument which measures actual disclosure behavior (Burhenne & Mirels, 1970; Chittick & Himelstein, 1967; Cozby, 1973; Munley & Rossiter, 1975; Wheeless & Grotz, 1975), few such studies have been made. Even those studies which have been conducted, however, are limited in that they examined disclosing behavior for only periods of 15 to 45 minutes (Munley & Rossiter, 1975; Himelstein & Kimbrough, 1963; Vondracek, 1969b). When Taylor et al. (1969) examined disclosing behavior between two individuals in four 45-minute interaction periods, it was found that the greatest amount of intimacy occurred during the first interaction period, even though a gradual increase from the second to fourth interaction period was noted. The Taylor study asked Ss to choose several statements from a prepared list to discuss with a confederate over an intercom system. Prior to the experimental period, each statement on the list was given an intimacy rating. Degree of intimacy in self-disclosure, therefore, was determined by the type of statements each S chose to discuss. Although this measure of self-disclosure does not take into account the effects of face-to-face interaction, the results of the study give some evidence that amount of self-disclosure is related to the length and stability of the acquaintance. Consequently, it appears that observation of actual disclosure behavior over time is needed to provide insight into its developmental aspects. Such a perspective is of particular importance in instructional settings, where extended relationships are the norm rather than the exception.

A second major shortcoming of the available research is that most investigators have focused exclusively on dyadic interactions, with the result that little is known about disclosure behavior in small groups (Levin & Gergen, 1969; Worthy, Gary, & Kahn, 1969; Powell, 1968; Jourard & Jaffee, 1970). Furthermore, studies which have examined self-disclosure in a small group setting have failed to assess disclosure during the normal proceedings of group interaction (Lubin & Harrison, 1964; Himelstein & Lubin, 1965; Himelstein & Kimbrough, 1963; Jourard, 1959). In most instances, attempts were made to assess disclosure behavior through the use of questionnaires, peer nominations, or written statements to others. The examination of self-disclosure during natural group discussion, therefore, has received little, if any, attention. Since group discussion is a common occurrence in many instructional settings, analysis of self-disclosure in a group context seems warranted.

Given the serious methodological limitations cited above, the present research was undertaken to use a behavioral measure of self-disclosure in a natural instructional setting. In view of the lack of information about self-disclosure in such a setting, it was felt methodologically best to use interaction periods comparable in length to those used by Taylor et al. (1969). If intimacy of self-disclosure is a function of time, use of Taylor's time schedule would allow comparisons to be made between amount of self-disclosure in a natural setting vs. a laboratory setting, in a group discussion vs. a dyadic exchange, and as measured by a true behavioral instrument, as opposed to the voluntary discussion of prepared statements. Although the length of the interaction periods used do not approximate the total amount of interaction found in a typical elementary, secondary, or college classroom, the purpose of this study is to generate descriptive data so that more precise hypotheses with regard to an instructional setting can be formulated later.

Methodology

Research Setting

Twice a year the Health Center at the University of Texas offers students and local residents the opportunity to participate in a Smoking Cessation Seminar. The Seminar consists of six, one-hour sessions evenly distributed over a three week period.[1] Cost of the Seminar is $5.00, with a refund of $4.00 guaranteed if the participant attends all six sessions and has stopped smoking by the final session.

During the fall semester, 1975, the Seminar was initially attended by nine community and University employees, six students, and one housewife (5 males, 11 females).[2] The participants ranged from 18-51 years of age. Each smoked approximately 28 cigarettes a day and had smoked an average of 13 years. The participants indicated a desire to stop smoking in order to recover or retain their health, improve interpersonal relationships, or to prevent their offspring from acquiring a smoking habit. Most of the participants had attempted cigarette withdrawal before, but were unsuccessful due to feelings of anxiety, physical longing, boredom, or social pressure.

All of the sessions followed the same basic format: (1) The instructor tried to establish a non-threatening atmosphere in which members felt free to share their experiences. The instructor did not evaluate the behavior of participants or criticize lack of progress. (2) Participants were assigned "tasks" to master before the next session. The tasks were designed to help the participants identify their smoking habits and required them to begin reducing their rate of cigarette consumption. (3) Participants were encouraged to discuss any difficulties they had in completing the tasks, and were given the opportunity to

receive feedback from the instructor and other group members. Participants who did not volunteer information were called upon by the instructor to discuss their smoking activities.

Measures of Self-Disclosure

Three parameters of self-disclosure: amount, intimacy, and frequency, were measured. Amount and intimacy were measured according to procedures developed by Vondracek (1969). Each session of the Seminar was tape recorded. Amount of self-disclosure was determined by timing Ss' verbalizations during each group session, excluding periods of silence and statements by the instructor. Intimacy of self-disclosure was measured by ratings made on a five point Likert-type scale, representing a theoretical continuum ranging from a score of 1 (least disclosing) to a score of 5 (most disclosing). Frequency of self-disclosure was determined by counting the number of comments made by each participant during a session.

Procedure

The six Seminar sessions were attended by two female observers, introduced as "graduate students interested in the processing of verbal messages." Participants were seated around a 12-foot, rectangular table, with the instructor seated at one end, and the observers seated five feet away. The observers did not participate in the sessions, but merely: (1) tape recorded each session; and (2) noted the source of each comment made during a session.[3] At the beginning of the Seminar, the instructor explained the presence of the tape recorder to the participants, and held a brief discussion as to whether or not the tape recorder would inhibit group discussion. The instructor freely offered to remove the tape recorder if anyone objected to it, but no complaints were expressed. During the course of the sessions, the observers developed a friendly relationship with the Ss, and Ss often spoke of their progress to the observers prior to the beginning of a session or immediately following a session. In such instances, observers were instructed to listen to the subject in a cordial, non-evaluative manner. Although the observers tried to remain inconspicuous during the actual discussion period, it is conceivable that some Ss may have resented their presence. No mention of such feelings were expressed, however, in the open-ended, written evaluations of the seminar conducted at the last session. At that time, all of the Ss commented they had felt "comfortable" in talking with the group.

Coding

Judges were two doctoral graduate students in the Department of Speech Communication. Each was a teaching assistant in an interpersonal communication course in which the concept of self-disclosure was studied and demonstrated through the use of experiential exercises. In training for the experiment, the judges read several descriptive and empirical studies dealing with various aspects of self-disclosure, and then participated in a discussion in which methods of identifying and measuring self-disclosure were examined in detail. In a second session, judges listened to a tape recorded discussion comparable to those analyzed in the Seminar. Each judge: (1) timed each speech excluding periods of silence or comments made by the instructor; and (2) rated the intimacy of each speech by using a five point Likert-type scale. Training continued until a Pearson product-moment correlation yielded an inter-rater reliability estimate of .95 for amount of disclosure, and .92 for intimacy of disclosure.

Actual data from the study was coded on four different occasions, with the tape of one session analyzed each time. The inter-rater reliability estimates for the four sessions ranged from .92 to .98 for amount of disclosure, and .90 to .94 for intimacy of disclosure.

Results

In order to measure the effect of successive sessions upon the amount, frequency, and intimacy of disclosing statements, a design for the analysis of variance for repeated measures was used. Three of the ten Ss examined missed one of the four sessions under consideration. The average of the scores received by each S in the meetings immediately preceding and following the missed meeting was used, therefore, to fill the empty cells. The data modification was accounted for by subtracting one degree of freedom from the error term each time data was inserted (Dayton, 1970; Veldman, 1975).

The average amount of disclosing statements for each S was calculated for each session. When an analysis of variance for the four sessions was performed, no significant differences in the amount of disclosing statements was found at the .05 level of confidence (Table 1), indicating that Ss spoke no more in the later sessions than they did in the earlier ones.

A frequency count of the disclosing statements made by each S in each session was tabulated. When an analysis of variance was performed upon the data, a significant difference in the frequency of disclosing statements was found ($F=3.18$; $df=3/24$; $p<.05$) (Table 2). The application of Duncan's Multiple-Range Test to the data revealed a significantly greater number of disclosing statements were made during Session V than during Sessions II, IV, or VI. Since Session V was the first session after the Ss were instructed to quit, they may have been unusually eager to report on their progress, or to seek support and feedback from others.

The average intimacy rating for each S during each session was determined. An analysis of variance applied to the data revealed a significant difference in the average intimacy ratings received at different sessions ($F=5.00$; $df=3/24$; $p<.01$) (Table 3). The application of Duncan's Multiple-Range Test to the data demonstrated that disclosures were significantly less intimate in Session II, than in Sessions IV, V, and VI. After the initial two sessions, therefore, Ss disclosed a significantly greater amount of intimate information about themselves. Intimacy appeared to increase as the number of sessions progressed.

Discussion

The average intimacy ratings were 1.41 for Session II, 2.36 for Session IV, 2.37 for Session V, and 2.77 for Session VI, all of which are below-average on a five point Likert-type scale. While the intimacy ratings increased from Session IV to Session VI, the increases were not significant. These results have several interesting implications.

First, the results contradict those found by Taylor et al. (1968) in that the greatest amount of intimacy in self-disclosure was found during the last period of interaction rather than the first. These results are significant in that they suggest disclosure behavior in a group situation may differ greatly from disclosure behavior in a dyadic situation. In realizing that certain elements inhibiting self-disclosure are present in any interaction situation, the results of this study suggest the presence of additional people may compound inhibition of disclosing behavior. The findings tentatively imply that individuals are significantly more reluctant to disclose revealing information about themselves in a group situation than they would be in simply talking to another individual.

Second, with the exception of Session V, the average amount and frequency of disclosing statements appeared to remain relatively stable from one session to the next. Within-session variance, however, was very high. The high variability of scores on these parameters suggests a group average may be misleading. Development of self-disclosure over time may be highly individualistic, and may better be described by examining individual behaviors rather than group behaviors. It appears to be an instance in which the instructor must be sensitive to the needs of individual students, as well as the needs of the group as a whole.

Although this study offers additional insight into the manner in which self-disclosure occurs in an instructional setting, it is highly exploratory due to the relatively new methodology used, and the lack of supporting studies. Given the apparent value of self-disclosure in an instructional setting, additional investigation seems needed.

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Footnotes

[1]Session I was an orientation session, and the Ss were not given the opportunity to disclose information about their smoking habits to other members of the group. A film was shown during Session III, leaving the Ss very little time to discuss their progress over the past few days. Due to the lack of disclosure activity in these two sessions, neither Session I nor III was included in the statistical analysis.

[2]Six of the Ss stopped coming to the sessions after the first or second meeting. The scores of those Ss, therefore, were not included in the statistical analysis.

Given the number of Ss attending each session, it was impossible to determine the source of a comment on the tape recording unless previous identification had been made. The observers identified contributors by using observation sheets numbered from one to 250, and by writing the S's names on the sheet according to the sequence in which the Ss spoke. For example, if the seventh comment was made by S_3, S_3's name would be written next to the number seven. The seventh comment on the tape, therefore, would be attributed to S_3. This information was needed in order to examine the relationship between self-disclosure and anxiety, the data of which is currently being analyzed by the authors.

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TABLE 1

Analysis of Variance of Duration Scores

Source	SS	df	ms	F	p
Total	15,738.85	39	-	-	-
Subjects	3,348.76	9	-	-	-
Treatments	2,891.90	3	963.97	2.435	<.1
Error	9,498.19	24	395.76	-	-

TABLE 2

Analysis of Variance of Frequency Scores

Source	SS	df	ms	F	p
Total	778.78	39	-	-	-
Subjects	314.53	9	-	-	-
Treatments	132.08	3	44.03	3.18	<.05
Error	332.18	24	13.84	-	-

TABLE 3

Analysis of Variance of Intimacy Scores

Source	SS	df	ms	F	p
Total	29.775	39	-	-	-
Subjects	3.7902	9	-	-	-
Treatments	9.99	3	3.33	5.0	<.01
Error	15.99	24	.666	-	-